

The New Normal on the Turkish-Syrian Border

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



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Ankara does not want the conflict to escalate, but it cannot live with the civil war in Syria and the continued cross-border shelling it breeds, accidental or not.

Tensions flared on the Turkish-Syrian border again over the weekend as Syrian regime forces and rebels clashed near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, just across from Turkey's Hatay province. Shells fired during the clashes fell into the Turkish town of Reyhanli, just on the other side of the border. On Monday, the Syrian regime bombed the Syrian border town of Ras al-Ayn, causing more shells to fall into Turkey as well as prompting Turkey to alert its fighter jets. This is the new state of affairs that has arisen since Syrian shells first fell on Turkey almost two months ago, resulting in an exchange of fire between the two countries that lasted for six days. The Turks are once again experiencing the spillover of clashes in Syria into Turkish towns across the countries' 900-kilometer shared border.

Alongside the destabilizing violence on the border, there have been numerous cases of shelling of Turkish territory, which Syrians have maintained is accidental. The conflict along the Turkish-Syrian border is more significant than it looks. Damascus has its hands full with Free Syrian Army (FSA) activity along its border with Turkey, bombing towns and villages in FSA-controlled areas repeatedly. Precision artillery targeting is a highly challenging task and the Syrian military is not known for its accuracy.

What is more, many FSA-held areas lie within a stone throw's distance of the Turkish border. Hence, even if the Syrians make an effort not to shell Turkish territory, they are likely to cause inadvertent damage, potentially killing Turkish citizens -- as happened on Oct. 3 when Syrian artillery landed in Akcakale, a Turkish town that lies across the border from the Syrian town of Tel Abyad. This incident resulted in the death of five people, a development that kicked off the Turkish reaction and started the current pattern of artillery exchange. The tension on the border continues to escalate, as clashes continued right on the other side of the border.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in the meantime, has made it clear that Turkey should not be tested and will

not hesitate to respond. Turkey has also asked NATO for Patriot missiles to defend its territory from the spillover of clashes.

As long as Syrian shells continue to fall on Turkey, Ankara will respond in kind. This leaves the Bashar al-Assad regime with two options: The first is to continue to face FSA fighters at the risk of an escalation with Turkey. The second is to stop shelling FSA-held areas near Turkey and to back off operations in border zones in order to reduce tensions with Ankara. Such a persistent pattern could eventually weaken Syrian forces in some areas near the Turkish border, letting the FSA fill in the vacuum. This would not create a contiguous safe haven, but it would lead to pockets of FSA-held territory inside Syria that enjoy de facto Turkish protection, in other words a "Swiss cheese-like safe haven with Turkey on it."

But that is not the solution to the Syria crisis. The international community needs to intervene in Syria to end the slaughter of civilians there now. To this end, the international community could consider creating safe havens to protect civilians as well as an effective arms embargo to cripple the regime's war machine. The cost of intervention in Syria may be high now, but it will only go up should civilian massacres continue unabated.

Currently, Syria looks eerily similar to Bosnia in the early 1990s. When the world did not act to end the slaughter of Muslims in the Balkan country, jihadists moved in to join the fight, and they succeeded in convincing the otherwise staunchly secular Bosnian Muslims that the world had abandoned them and that they were better off with jihadists. In Bosnia, the international community intervened before it was too late, tempering radicalization. If the world is too slow to respond and Syria radicalizes, becoming a jihadist safe haven, it could become a Sisyphean task to normalize that country -- Afghanistan is a case in point.

Ankara is between a rock and a hard place. Turkey does not want the conflict to escalate, but it cannot live with the civil war in Syria either. Yet, whichever way Ankara chooses to act, the frequent shelling between Turkey and Syria has ushered in a "new normal" between the two countries: mutual escalation -- such as the recent reciprocal decisions to bar each other from their respective air spaces -- coupled with "Swiss cheese safe havens with Turkey on it" inside Syria.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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